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ABSTRACT

Assessment and rehabilitation of juvenile offenders has been enhanced by the identification of several cognitive and behavioral dimensions on which offenders differ from non-offenders. To investigate the influence of social skills training on locus of control, self-esteem, and observed behavior, 27 adolescent male offenders, aged 12-17, participated in one of three treatment modalities. The subjects were divided into two groups classified as low-frequency or high-frequency offenders. Subsequently, equal numbers of those two groups were assigned to structured social skills training, unstructured discussion, or a control group. The two treatment groups met for two, 3 hour sessions. Cognitive skills were assessed by the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale; behavioral skills were assessed by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale and a social skills checklist, which was completed by two independent raters. Measurements were taken 3 days before, 3 days after, and 2 weeks after treatment. An analysis of the results showed that members of the treatment groups were more internally-oriented after treatment. Further, the structured social skills training approach was more effective with high-frequency offenders, while the discussion group was more effective with low-frequency offenders. Overall, low-frequency offenders exhibited better social skills than their high-frequency counterparts. The results were maintained at the 2-week follow-up. (BL)

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Remediating the Deficit:

Social Skills Training with Juvenile Offenders

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Running head: Social Skills Training

ABSTRACT

The present study investigated the influence of social skills training on cognitive and behavioral characteristics of juvenile offenders. Structured social skills training, an unstructured discussion group, and a control group were compared. Subjects were 30 adolescent male offenders who had been previously arrested for a variety of offenses. The design was a 3 x 2 factorial design with a repeated measure. Between subjects factors were type of social skills training and number of offenses. Cognitive variables measured were locus of control and self-concept. There was a behavioral measure of social skills. Results revealed a significant main effect for treatment groups on the locus of control measure with structured social skills training and discussion groups indicating greater internality than the control group. The main effect was qualified by a significant Group x Frequency interaction which revealed that the structured social skills training approach was more effective with high-frequency offenders and the discussion group was more effective with low-frequency offenders. These results were maintained at a 2-week follow-up. Low-frequency offenders exhibited better social skills than high-frequency offenders. The discussion focused on the efficacy of social skills training with juvenile offenders and the relationships between cognitive variables and behavior in these individuals.

Social Skills Training with Juvenile Offenders

The helping professions are playing an ever-expanding role in the assessment and rehabilitation of juvenile offenders. Recent research has identified several dimensions on which offenders differ from non-offenders. Locus of control and self-esteem are two cognitive concepts which have received interest in terms of their relationships to persistent offending.

Studies by Rotter (1971) and Eitzen (1975) have shown a tendency for young offenders to score as "external" on locus of control scales. Ollendick and Elliott (Note 1) refer to locus of control as a "person variable" that influences the effects of behavioral programs with young offenders. From a study with institutionalized juvenile delinquents, Ollendick and Elliott found that internally-oriented delinquents exhibited more compliant and less aggressive behavior during a behavioral modification program, and they were discharged in a shorter period of time than their externally-oriented counterparts. At a 1-year follow-up, the internally-oriented delinquents showed a 26% recidivism rate while the externally-oriented delinquents showed a 58% recidivism rate.

Recklass (1961) and Eitzen (1975) found a tendency for juvenile offenders to score low on self-esteem scales. Cohen (1959) has suggested that many adolescents who fail within the middle-class education system, and hence suffer a loss in self-esteem, tend to regain self-esteem from successful identification with a delinquent sub-culture. Therefore, it would seem important to help protect adolescents from developing a lifestyle of persistent offending by using behavioral intervention approaches which strive to increase self-esteem.

From a behavioral viewpoint, delinquent behavior may be conceptualized as resulting from situation-specific social skills deficits. McFall (1976) noted that juvenile offenders differ from non-offenders in that offenders habitually attain their goals (e.g., status, respect, employment) through illegal means. McFall suggested that often offenders behave maladaptively simply because they lack the requisite skills to act appropriately. In recent years, this skills-deficit conception of deviant behavior has been reflected in a number of skill-training programs, including the treatment of male adolsecent delinquents (Sarason & Ganzer, 1973). Sarason and Ganzer (1973) compared the effectiveness of modeling, structured discussion, and control groups on a variety of self-report and behavioral measures. They found that both modeling and structured discussion were effective treatments for interpersonal skills deficits in juvenile delinquents. Subjects in both the modeling and the discussion groups showed greater shifts toward internalization on the Rotter (1966) locus of control scale and lower recidivism rates 3 years following discharge than did the control group subjects. The modeling groups clearly demonstrated the most change; discussion procedures proved only partially effective. Other studies (e.g., Curran, 1975; Klarreich, 1981) have indicated that structured social skills training procedures are more effective than less structured procedures such as discussion groups.

As individuals become more skilled in recognizing and choosing appropriate alternatives to social and interpersonal situations, one would expect a more responsible lifestyle. Similarly, with the acquisition of appropriate social skills, one would expect certain cognitive changes such as a shift toward a more internal locus of control and a concurrent increase in self-esteem.

The present study investigated the influence of social skills training on locus of control, self-esteem, and observed behavior. Structured social skills training and an unstructured discussion approach were compared to a control group. Effects at a 2-week follow-up were also evaluated. In contrast to prior research in the area of social skills training, the present study: (a) involved a non-institutionalized population of adolescent male offenders, (b) employed a structured and an unstructured treatment procedure, both of which strived to improve social skills, (c) matched subjects on frequency of offenses (high vs. low-frequency offenders), and (d) examined both cognitive and behavioral factors, allowing the investigation of inter-relationships.

METHOD

Subjects and Design

The subjects were 30 adolescent male offenders who were assigned to a probation-counseling program by the Oktibbeha County Youth Court, Youth Services Division, Starkville, Mississippi. The subjects ranged in age from 12 to 17 years and had been arrested for a variety of offenses (ranging from vandalism to assault). Informed consent was obtained from subjects and their parents. Subjects were given the opportunity to attend a social outing as an incentive to participate in the study.

The present study employed a 3 x 2 factorial design with a repeated measure. The male offenders were divided into two groups using a median split, and classified as low-frequency or high-frequency offenders. Low-frequency offenders were arrested for less than four offenses; high-frequency offenders had a record of four or more offenses. The 30 subjects were assigned, from the previously established low- and high-frequency subject

pools, to one of three conditions: (a) the structured social skills training group, (b) the discussion group, and (c) the control group. High- and low-frequency offenders were equally represented in each treatment group. One subject was lost from each treatment group. The analyses were based on the data of 27 subjects, with nine in each treatment group.

Procedure

Treatment Groups. The structured social skills training group and the discussion group met for two weekly sessions, each lasting three hours. The group sessions were led by two trainers, a black male and a white female. Both trainers were second year graduate students in the M.S. program in clinical psychology at Mississippi State University. Subjects in both groups were informed that the purpose of the groups was to learn skills for dealing with people, dealing with feelings, and becoming more comfortable in social interactions. The structured social skills training group was conducted in accordance with an outline developed by Goldstein, Sprafkin, Gershaw, and Klein (1980) for behaviorally-oriented social skills training. The same basic format was used in both structured social skills training sessions. The major focus was on 10 specific target skills identified by the subjects' youth counselor and probation officer as being particularly problematic (i.e., listening, expressing feelings, understanding the feelings of others, negotiating, self-control, avoiding trouble with others, avoiding fights, dealing with accusations, dealing with group pressure, and setting goals). Training procedures included direct instruction, role playing, modeling, and homework assignments. The trainers were directive in their interactions with trainees.

Subjects in the discussion group had informal discussions of their problems in interacting with others. The trainers provided some direction as to choice of topic, but made few direct suggestions for coping with problem situations. No role playing or modeling occurred and no homework assignments were given. Subjects in the discussion group received a level of leader contact equivalent to that of subjects in the structured social skills training group.

The control group did not meet for weekly sessions. Throughout the study, subjects in the control group were only involved in their scheduled amount of time spent with the youth counselor. The three groups are conceptualized as distinct levels of social skills training with the structured social skills training group representing a high level of social skills training, the discussion group representing an intermediate level of social skills training, and the control group representing a low level of social skills training. Note that the subjects' interactions with the experimenter at the assessment sessions may well have represented some small degree of socialization even for the subjects in the control group.

Dependent Measures. The Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale for Children (Nowicki and Strickland, 1973) was used in the 40 item form. The self-esteem questionnaire used was the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (Fitts, 1964). The questionnaire was administered 3 days before, 3 days after, and 2 weeks after the treatment phase.

A Social Skills Checklist, modified from Goldstein et al. (1980), was used to obtain direct behavioral measures of 10 specific social skills. Subjects were rated as they interacted with their probation counselor. Ability to relate to authority figures is relevant to juvenile offenders as they may avoid or minimize legal difficulties by negotiating with police persons or other legal

authorities. Ratings were made by a youth counselor and an intern trained in techniques of behavioral rating. The raters did not participate in any other phase of the study and were naive to the group membership of the subjects. Ratings were made during the week before treatment and 2 weeks after the treatment phase.

RESULTS

Mean pretreatment scores on the two cognitive measures, the behavior measure, and age were examined through single-factor analysis of variance. None of the resulting F ratios was significant (all $ps > .05$), indicating initial comparability between groups on all measures.

Analyses of covariance were performed on the posttest and follow-up test scores of all dependent measures, using the pretest as the covariate. Use of the pretest as the covariate was supported by the correlations of the pretests with both the posttests and the follow-up tests for each dependent measure. The Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS) pretest correlated with the posttest and follow-up with a mean correlation of .85, $p < .001$. The pretest of the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale correlated with the posttest and follow-up with a mean correlation of .87, $p < .001$. The pretest of the behavioral measure was also significantly correlated, $r = .63$, $p < .001$, with the posttest.

Tennessee Self Concept Scale

Analysis of covariance on the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS) yielded no significant main or interaction effects. Thus, neither social skills training nor frequency of offenses nor passage of time impacted upon the TSCS.

Locus of Control Scale

Analysis of covariance performed on the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale revealed a significant main effect for structured social skills training, discussion, and control groups (Ms = 14.18, 14.80, and 16.21, respectively), F (2, 20) = 4.98, $p < .05$. The Newman-Keuls' Multiple Range Test revealed significant differences ($p < .05$) between the structured social skills training group and the control group and between the discussion group and the control group. No significant main effects were found for frequency of offenses or time. There was a significant Group x Frequency interaction, $F(2, 20) = 3.89$, $p < .05$. The adjusted cell means for the Group x Frequency interaction are presented in Table 1. A Newman-Keuls' Multiple Range Test indicated that

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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for low-frequency offenders, the discussion group produced significantly ($p < .05$) lower (more internal) scores on the Nowicki-Strickland Locus of Control Scale than either the structured social skills training group or the control group. These results indicated that for low-frequency offenders, the discussion group resulted in a more internal locus of control. The structured social skills training group and the control group did not significantly differ. However, for high-frequency offenders, the structured social skills training group produced significantly ($p < .05$) more internal locus of control scores than either the discussion or control groups. In addition, it was noted that high-frequency offenders in the structured social skills training group obtained significantly ($p < .05$) more internal scores than low-frequency offenders, regardless of treatment.

A significant Group x Frequency x Time interaction, F (2, 21) = 4.01, $p < .05$ was also obtained. Using the procedure recommended by Kirk (1968), the three-way interaction was divided into its component two-way interactions. The Group x Frequency interaction was significant at the follow-up, F (2, 20) = 4.65, $p < .05$; but only reached marginal significance at the posttest, ($p = .059$). It was noted that the patterning of means was the same at the posttest as at the follow-up maintaining the same pattern as the overall Group x Frequency interaction. Thus the most meaningful focus of interpretation is on the overall Group x Frequency interaction.

Social Skills Dependent Measure

The 10 items of the Social Skills Checklist were summed to produce a global index of social skills. Analysis of covariance was used to analyze the Social Skills Index. The higher the index score, the higher the rating on global social skills. Results revealed that the main effect for treatment groups approached significance, $p = .072$. Adjusted cell means for the structured social skills training group, the discussion group, and the control group are 33.57, 33.67, and 29.39, respectively. The main effect for frequency of offenses (high vs. low) was significant, F (1, 20) = 7.89, $p < .05$. Inspection of the adjusted cell means across groups revealed that the low-frequency offenders ($M = 34.60$) were rated significantly higher on social skills than the high-frequency offenders ($M = 29.82$).

The Social Skills Index was significantly correlated with the TSCS at the posttest ($r = .41$, $p < .05$) and at the follow-up ($r = .46$, $p < .01$). The Social Skills Index was significantly correlated with the measure of locus of control at the posttest ($r = -.35$, $p < .05$).

DISCUSSION

From the present findings, it cannot be concluded that self-esteem was significantly increased as measured by the Tennessee Self Concept Scale (TSCS). However, the social skills training treatments were effective in influencing subjects' locus of control. After treatments, both the structured social skills training group and the discussion group were significantly more internally-oriented than the control group. This suggests that for adolescent male offenders, social skills training helps further the belief that one's behavior and consequences are controlled by oneself rather than by external factors.

Even more noteworthy than the main effect is the finding that particular types of juvenile offenders respond differently to different treatment approaches. High-frequency offenders benefited most from the more structured social skills training procedure while low-frequency offenders benefited most from the less structured discussion group. In accordance with the present findings, it would seem logical to tailor the social skills training approach to the intended audience. It is suggested that high-frequency offenders do not significantly benefit from unstructured skills training; they are best educated in an environment where they are exposed to the disciplined regime offered by structured training.

The expectation that the discussion group would report significantly greater internality than the control group was supported for low-frequency offenders, but not for high-frequency offenders. In contrast to earlier research findings which minimize the effectiveness of discussion procedures, the present study indicated that the unstructured discussion procedure is an effective training method for some subjects. A possible explanation for

the success of the discussion approach with low-frequency offenders is the presence of requisite skills as evidenced by the low-frequency offenders' higher ratings on the behavioral measure.

Increased internality for treatment groups was maintained during the follow-up phase. The Group x Frequency x Time interaction revealed that there was a significant Group x Frequency interaction at the follow-up phase, but not at the posttest phase. This indicates that differences became even greater with the passage of time. In accordance with findings by Eitzen (1975), when positive attitude change accompanies the acquisition of appropriate social skills, the probability of a lasting effect is increased. It would seem important for any behavioral intervention program with young offenders to strive toward positive attitude change in areas such as locus of control and self-esteem. In the present study, the significant correlations between the cognitive variables and the behavioral ratings of social skills suggest that social skills training programs may also produce positive changes in offenders' belief systems.

The conceptualization of delinquent behavior as a social skills deficit is supported by the finding that low-frequency offenders exhibited better social skills than did high-frequency offenders (regardless of treatment group membership). The implication is that high-frequency offenders characteristically exhibit more social skills deficits than do low-frequency offenders. According to Goldstein et al. (1980), social skills training is most effective when trainees are grouped according to degree of deficiency in the target skills. In the present study, it is possible that greater behavioral differences would have been observed if a homogeneous grouping method were used, i.e., if the training groups were composed of either all high- or low-

frequency offenders. It seems logical to group trainees according to some discrete ability and then tailor the instructional methods to the shared characteristics of the group. Additional research is needed to clarify the importance of developing specific treatment approaches for distinct groups of juvenile offenders.

To what extent the present findings would generalize to female juvenile offenders, other treatment modalities, and shorter training sessions spaced over an extended period of time are provocative empirical issues. It is not possible to draw conclusions about long-term follow-up data; however, it is encouraging to note that only 6 hours of the social skills training treatments were effective in producing significantly more internal locus of control scores than reported by the control group, and results were maintained at the 2-week follow-up. A reasonable assumption is that a systematic social skills training program conducted over an extended period of time would produce even more dramatic effects than obtained in the present study.

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Table 1

Adjusted Cell Means for the Treatment Group X

Frequency of Offense Interaction on Locus of Control

	Treatment Group		
Frequency of Offense	Social Skills Training	Discussion	Control
High	13.01	15.45	16.16
Low	15.36	14.16	16.25